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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 002053

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ABKHAZIA: VIOLENCE CONTINUES, TROOPS DIG
IN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Kent Logsdon for Reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. Two disturbing trends have emerged in Abkhazia in recent weeks. Abkhaz and Russian forces have taken steps to establish firmer control over the administrative boundary, such as reducing crossing points, extending trenches and limiting cooperation with UNOMIG. De facto officials have accused Georgia of intentionally planning provocative acts of violence and have reportedly taken steps to defend the boundary and respond. At the same time, unconfirmed press reports of violence and even fatalities suggest some tension within Abkhazia between the Abkhaz and the Russian occupying forces, raising questions about the harmony between the new allies. The competing versions of individual events increase the danger that rumors could provoke a disproportionate response to any of these incidents. An October 25 explosion outside Abkhazia in Eritskali that killed two Georgians, including the local head of the district administration, offers a sober reminder of the continuing danger on the boundary. End summary and comment.

DIGGING IN

¶2. (SBU) Both the EUMM and UNOMIG have observed numerous examples of steps Abkhaz and Russian forces have taken in recent weeks to assert greater control over their side of the administrative boundary. Three bridges were blown up within a few minutes of each other November 1, bringing the total of disabled bridges to six since October 19. At other locations, such as Pakhulani, Russian forces block movement across existing bridges. An Abkhaz commander told UNOMIG that one bridge is closed to civilian traffic, although it remains open for the UN, Red Cross, Enguri power station workers, and "emergency cases." In some cases pedestrians are allowed to cross, but not vehicles. The current rate for departing Abkhazia, at least in the area of Rike, Rukhi and Pakhulani, is around 600 (approximately 22 USD) rubles per person and 50 rubles (approximately 2 USD) per bag, levied by Abkhaz and sometimes Russian forces. One man with two bags told UNOMIG he had to pay 2,000 rubles (approximately 75 USD). UNOMIG has also heard that those fees are sometimes charged to those entering Abkhazia as well, meaning that some travelers end up paying in both directions.

¶3. (SBU) UNOMIG has noted numerous examples of Abkhaz and Russian forces reinforcing and extending trenches in positions along the administrative boundary. One patrol observed "a series of interlinked and independent trenches on both sides of the road within a radius of 100 meters from the checkpoint, seemingly to ensure all round defense." Another patrol observed "an area of about 200 sq. meters leveled around post with a series of interlinked trenches being fortified on both sides of the road. . . It is assessed that all round company-sized defense is being prepared." UNOMIG has also seen some evidence of additional Abkhaz forces at

boundary checkpoints. More and more locals are reporting mined areas along the boundary, which discourage locals from using unofficial crossings. One Abkhaz commander said the Georgian government had mined the Abkhaz side of the boundary, using released prisoners to do so.

¶4. (SBU) UNOMIG has heard several stories recently of individuals being harassed, although the identity of the attackers is sometimes difficult to determine. On November 3 an individual on a cart was stopped by three armed, masked men in uniform, who shot five times in the air, beat the man, then carried him off to Nabakevi. Locals told UNOMIG that on October 31 three men in Kvemo Bargebi were detained by Abkhaz militia from Gali, who accused the men of mugging and illegal gun possession. Likewise in Gagida, locals reported that four individuals were detained for drug possession and demanded 5,000 lari for their release. Locals have also complained that the decreased ability to cross the boundary has made it more difficult to buy daily commodities, including medicine. Georgian Interior Ministry officials in a few locations told UNOMIG about nightly automatic gunfire from the Abkhaz side of the boundary, which locals confirmed.

¶5. (SBU) UNOMIG itself has also encountered an increasing amount of resistance north of the administrative boundary, in particular from Abkhaz individuals. Reactions have included polite refusals to let patrols pass, sometimes based on specific orders; refusals to speak with patrols; requests that patrols not return to particular checkpoints; denunciations of the UN as working contrary to Abkhaz interests. Some of the latter sentiments have been expressed by private Abkhaz citizens who happen to encounter UNOMIG

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patrols. One Russian soldier noticed the Pakistani flag on a UNOMIG monitor and launched into an extended diatribe against Pakistan for "sponsoring" terrorism.

¶6. (SBU) Steps to increase control of the boundary are not necessarily well coordinated, and the Abkhaz and Russians have not yet established a hermetic seal. The EUMM reports that the various Russian units and de facto authorities involved in enforcing border control are not very well organized. Locals have told UNOMIG about various makeshift crossings they can still use, despite reports of mines. In the case of the bridge discussed by the Abkhaz commander in paragraph 2, UNOMIG itself observed about 20 civilians with bags crossing later the same day. Shortly after the October 19 destruction of the bridge near Shamgona, neither Abkhaz nor Georgian Interior Ministry officials were obstructing 30-40 locals from making the crossing (apparently by fording the river) daily.

ONGOING VIOLENCE

¶7. (SBU) The Georgian press has reported a series of violent incidents in Abkhazia in recent weeks. The lack of reliable sources has made it difficult to confirm most of them, but the persistence of the stories suggest a state of heightened tension north of the boundary. A number of incidents involve violence between Abkhaz and Russians. In response to recent incidents, on October 27 Abkhaz "President" Bagapsh blamed them on the Georgian side, accusing the Georgian government of seeking to disrupt the ceasefire agreement and announcing he had ordered his "army" and "border guards" to respond to provocations promptly. "Foreign Minister" Shamba accused the EUMM of being ineffective by failing to prevent such acts. UNOMIG reported that the de facto Security Council established a special unit to fight Georgian "terrorist groups" in the Gali district; as a result, UNOMIG expects increased activity by Abkhaz units, including in areas not previously covered.

-- On October 29, Russian forces confirmed to UNOMIG that an armored vehicle skidded off the road, killing one Russian

soldier and wounding another. The Georgian press reported that two vehicles were destroyed by mine laid by the Russians themselves and that two soldiers died.

-- On October 28, an Abkhaz commander told UNOMIG a fellow soldier was injured in an ambush near Repo and Primorsk, when armed men shot at him with automatic weapons from a short distance. Although he could not identify the armed men, the commander said they looked like Georgian special forces, and they were carrying American weapons. UNOMIG noted that the latter fact means little, because many American weapons were captured by the Abkhaz in the Kodori Valley.

-- Around October 28 in Okumi, Russian forces reportedly fired at the car of and killed the Abkhaz deputy head of administration of the village Repi-Shesheliti, Zurab Gvaramia.

-- Around October 28, drunken Russian forces reportedly clashed with Abkhaz forces in Ghumurishi, and four civilians were injured as a result.

-- On October 27, villagers pulled the corpse of 19-year-old Alexandre Khuntsaria out of a well in Gali district. Press reports suggested that Russian forces first checked his documents, then killed him.

-- Around October 26, a Russian patrol engaged in a gunfight with Abkhaz militia near the village of Pichora, wounding two Abkhaz.

-- On October 24, two Abkhaz officials were reportedly murdered in the village of Konstitutsia. One, Raul Ashuba, Qmurdered in the village of Konstitutsia. One, Raul Ashuba, was the mayor of the village and a "hero" of the Abkhaz war. De facto authorities blamed "the Georgian group of saboteurs" for the murders, but representatives of the Tbilisi-loyal Abkhaz government-in-exile blamed an internal struggle among criminal groups, possibly linked to a staff change at the Enguri Power Plant, where Russian officials appointed a new supervisor. Some locals suggested a link with the citrus business, of which Ashuba had been forced to give up control.

-- On October 22, Eduard Emin-Zade, chief of intelligence of Abkhazia's "defense ministry," was murdered in the Gali district. Abkhaz officials said Emin-Zade had been on a mission "to unmask the masterminds of the recent frequent terrorist acts," while Georgian officials attributed the murder to business interests. Emin-Zade was known as a close ally of Aslan Abashidze, and in August he reportedly

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supervised the stationing of Russian forces in the areas adjacent to Abkhazia. "President" Bagapsh ordered law enforcement officials to solve the murder as quickly as possible and to tighten the boundary-crossing regime. A few days later, Emin-Zade's associate, Mr. Kvevkeskiri, possibly his attorney, was shot and wounded, reportedly after handing sums of money to Russian forces. Some Russians were wounded in the attack as well.

-- Around October 16, an Abkhaz police officer was reportedly killed in a confrontation with Russian forces in Gali district.

-- Around October 11, a Russian vehicle reportedly exploded in Sida, killing 5-10 soldiers. UNOMIG was not able to confirm this event, other than to collect reports of locals hearing an explosion in approximately the right area.

-- On October 6, Russian forces told UNOMIG unknown assailants ambushed an Abkhaz patrol near Nabakevi and shot dead Abkhaz "Border Guard" Mukhran Ashuba.

-- On October 5, a thirteen-year-old boy was found dead near Sida; UNOMIG determined he most likely died of blunt injuries to the head. Georgian press reported that Russian forces

tried to loot his home, abused his family members, and he was killed trying to protect his mother.

ATTACK AT ERITSKALI

18. (SBU) On October 25, the EUMM and UNOMIG both received reports of explosions in Eritskali, a village just outside Abkhazia, west of Jvari and the Enguri Dam. Patrols from both organizations arrived to witness another explosion in a house that killed both the local head of administration, Giva Meboniya, and the owner of the house and wounded a police officer. Both organizations saw RPG-22 rocket launchers, which they believe caused the original explosions, but both organizations believe the fatal explosion was caused by a remotely detonated explosive inside the house. On October 30, the EUMM reported hearing stories that the cause of the attack was a "settling of accounts," suggesting that the attack may not have had any political significance.

COMMENT:

19. (C) As the above list makes clear, Abkhazia remains a dangerous place for all parties. Numerous potential motivations for violence exist, from private disputes to Russian-Abkhaz rivalry to the larger Georgian dispute with Russia and the de facto authorities. The difficulty in investigating incidents and obtaining reliable, objective information means any side can use almost any incident to justify any response. One response from the Abkhaz and Russians seems to have been to assert greater control over the administrative boundary. It is not clear, however, that they are working together entirely harmoniously, and it is also not clear that clamping down on the boundary will resolve the violence. Ideally, the EUMM and UNOMIG will gain increased access and improve their ability to investigate incidents. In the meantime, as the international community continues to work to encourage restraint, it will be important not to allow intra-Abkhazia clashes, or private matters, to be called provocations and exploited politically.

LOGSDON